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ABSTRACT

Performance assessment (observational assessment) can be an effective alternative to traditional paper and pencil tests when measuring academic achievement. Benefits of performance tests include: (1) testing knowledge synthesis rather than just knowledge acquisition; (2) allowing for diagnosis of individual needs and an immediate adjustment of instruction based on those needs; (3) adapting to any grade level or subject; and (4) enabling students to rate themselves and others. Performance tests can involve either formal or informal assessments. They can differ substantially in the information they provide and in the ways they are used, ranging from managing instruction to certifying skills to making student placement decisions. Performance tests are an effective measure of progressive growth in a wide variety of school subjects. (DC)

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Assessment Supplement for Teachers

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Measuring Achievement? Assess Performance!

Most teachers are quick to point out that day-to-day classroom assessment includes far more than paper and pencil tests. Teachers rely on many tools to track student growth. One of the most important of these is the teacher's personal observation and assessment of student performance.

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh, who analyzed classroom assessment, found observation to be "overwhelmingly" preferred via test scores by teachers. "Teacher preference, in effect, is for continuous movies, in color with sound, while a test score, or even a profile of scores, is more akin to a black-and-white photograph."¹ Such observational assessments—alternatives to paper and pencil tests—are the focal point of the work of the Center for Performance Assessment.

Teachers who use performance tests challenge the student to do more than select the right answer or fill in the blank. They ask instead that students synthesize information, analyze problems and apply what has been learned. Thus they test more than knowledge acquisition.

Performance assessment also gleans information that teachers need to diagnose needs and manage instruction. The assessment brings testing and instruction as close as

possible. Many teachers use observation during the teaching process to immediately adjust instruction that promotes effective learning.

In addition, performance tests fit into any subject at any grade level. They suit many situations where traditional tests just don't work. As an example, they form the heart of classroom assessment in the primary grades where students have yet to develop reading, writing and other test taking skills. At all levels, they can serve as the most valid means of measuring communication skills, including oral reading, writing, speaking and literacy skills. Further, performance tests can be used without the student being aware of the assessment. That's a definite asset in instances where extreme test anxiety impedes the work of individual students or where the teacher fears that a traditional test situation may be too artificial.

Yet another benefit exists. Students can be trained to participate in the performance assessment process, rating their own and each other's work. Teachers taking advantage of this alternative create student awareness of the skills needed for good performance.

Because of these benefits, many teachers use observational assessments as a key part of managing

their day-to-day instruction. Yet, teachers sometimes remain hesitant about the reliance on their own judgments. Grading time comes around and teachers revert to traditional paper and pencil tests. Why? Because parents, administrators, and even students demand "objective" evidence of the reason for a given

"... performance tests challenge the student to do more than select the right answer or fill in the blank."

grade. The perception of traditional tests as vehicles of hard data vies with a sense that teacher judgments are unsubstantiated guesses. By using and describing performance tests appropriately, teachers can transform that appearance. So-called subjective opinions can be respected, data-based professional judgments. The metamorphosis in perception allows valuable assessment tools to be used to fullest potential.

¹Salmon-Cox, Leslie. Teachers and standardized achievement tests: What's really happening? *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1981, 631-634.

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Multiple Uses for Performance Tests

Performance assessments can be conducted in many ways. They can be designed as highly-structured test activities in which students are given specific exercises and performance is rated according to prespecified factors. For example: a high school English teacher develops an assessment to select students for a remedial writing program. Each student is asked to write two brief compositions. The writing samples are independently rated by two English teachers in terms of their clarity of expression, organization and appropriate use of grammar. Students are selected on the basis of the results. In other instances, performance assessments can be more casual parts of the teacher's everyday diagnosis of skills. Here is an example: While listening to students' oral reading, a third grade teacher notices a student consistently faltering over certain beginning sounds. The teacher makes a note of the problem for future individual work.

Note that these two examples—one formal and the other informal—include the four basic elements of a test: a decision situation within which the assessment takes place (e.g., selection for remediation and oral reading diagnosis, in the above examples); a test exercise (stimulus event) which gives

rise to the students' response (e.g., writing exercise and oral reading activity); the actual student response to be evaluated (e.g., writing and reading performance); and a rating or judgment about performance (e.g., rating of components of writing and identifying reading difficulty).

"These tests, properly designed, are powerful tools for the teacher."

Like other tests, performance assessments can differ substantially in the information they provide and how they are used. For example, the reason for the assessment can range from (1) day-to-day instructional management, to (2) certifying skills for grading, to (3) selecting students for placement into advanced or remedial programs. The test exercise can be either a highly-structured or informal classroom situation. Student responses may include any observable student behavior or product. And ratings of performance range from systematic scoring procedures such as rating scales and checklists, to informal procedures, such as recording spontaneous behaviors.

Performance tests are effective ways to evaluate a student's progressive growth. Their use calls for demonstration of skills rather than recall of facts. Consequently, performance assessments may provide more diverse and helpful information than traditional multiple-choice true/false, or fill-in-the-blank tests. Performing students show proficiency in applying learned information or skills to a new situation. They are effective measures in:

- communication skills:
speaking, reading, listening and writing
- problem solving and decision making
- computer skills
- life skills
- vocational proficiencies
- performing arts, music, drama, singing, dance
- visual arts: design, photography

These tests, properly designed, are powerful tools for the teacher. They readily aid in identifying students' learning needs, in adjusting instruction, in grouping, and in evaluating student proficiency. In fact, no classroom should be without them.